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The Visegrad Countries and “Post-Truth” Who is Responsible for Delivering the Kremlin’s Narrative to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland?

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Introduction

The Russian Federation’s disinformation campaign, implemented to justify its aggressive policy towards Ukraine, has made many analysts, politicians and regular citizens aware that the Kremlin has been deliberately and cleverly exploiting propaganda mechanisms for its own purposes. Incidents and occurrences such as the Crimean annexation propaganda and the war in Donbas have led to the eye-opening conclusion that the Kremlin’s activities are not a return to typical Soviet-

style propaganda. On the contrary, the Russian propaganda machine has been operating for years. The Kremlin had never really decided to drop it entirely, and by implementing new methods and tools (such as social media), propaganda has evolved to a whole new level.

The Kremlin’s disinformation methods create an effective model of geopolitical influence. Russian propaganda distorts the perception of people, events and even entire institutions (the EU, NATO). The results are impressive: propaganda has created an alternative

version of events at the Euromaidan (the seizure of power by fascists), the war in Donbas (internal conflict in Ukraine) and Syria (Americans supporting ISIS to eliminate Bashar al-Assad). This disinformation destabilizes the political situation in many countries by supporting one political faction and simultaneously discrediting others. Recent cases included the presidential elections in the United States and France, as well as the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands. Similar disinformation campaigns are expected for the German parliamentary elections later this year.

The following report describes Russian disinformation in the Visegrad countries. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, all formerly part of the Eastern Bloc, have all become the targets and victims of the Kremlin’s information warfare. Putin’s regime exploits various narratives to achieve its goals in the Visegrad countries. It elicits hatred towards the EU, USA and NATO, encourages conflict with bordering nations and perpetuates the negative image of the “other” (the Roma minority, Ukrainians, refugees).

The text of this policy brief presents the main narratives of the Kremlin’s propaganda among the Visegrad countries, but first and foremost, it reveals important entities (people and organizations) that stand behind the Kremlin’s narrative in each of the respective countries. Although some of them may, indeed, be Moscow agents, many simply follow the Kremlin’s agenda because they actually believe the propaganda that they share and/or create. The people, political parties, NGOs, paramilitary movements and media mentioned in this report do not constitute the full list of entities that may be considered pro-Russian. In many cases, however, they are among the most recognizable ones.

Poland

In general, the Russian narrative does not have a substantial influence on the views of mainstream Polish politicians and the media, and consequently, on society. More specifically, it fails to generate positive attitudes toward the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policies, and toward Vladimir Putin in particular. It has also failed in convincing Poles *en masse* that Russia is not to be blamed for the conflict in Ukraine.

Due to the fact that Russian propaganda cannot make any significant progress in improving the image of Putin or Russia among Poles, improving the Kremlin’s image is not high on Russia’s agenda. Instead, the priority lies in introducing and moderating topics which, at first glance, might not seem to have anything to do with Russia, but which ultimately serve to strengthen Russia’s position in the region and weaken Poland’s by provoking internal arguments within society and tensions with neighboring countries. Polish-Ukrainian relations are the number one topic being exploited as part of the general Russian media strategy in Poland after the Crimean conflict. Though complex, the Russian narrative tries to reduce those relations to the level of primitive disputes revolving around historical guilt and the way that historical differences surface today. The Russian narrative also attacks Ukrainian migration to Poland, threatening Poles with Ukrainians taking their jobs and causing wage stagnation. Other topics include anti-Americanism, criticism of NATO and the EU and resentment towards Germany.

Politics

The pro-Russian narrative in the Polish political system is mostly present outside the Polish parliament. The most obvious example of Russian influence is the work of the **Change (Zmiana)** party. The self-

proclaimed (on its website) “first non-American political party” (the Polish court has not allowed it to register as a political party) was established by Mateusz Piskorski, a former member of the Polish parliament from the **Self-Defence** party (**Samoobrona**). Piskorski aligned himself closely with the Kremlin’s agenda during the Crimean conflict. As he stated in 2014:

[Ukraine] is a collapsed state. Once the West, including Poland, backed Bandera’s supporters in Ukraine, the country was thrown into chaos [...] The people of Crimea have been pro-Russian for a long time, and they are afraid of the Banderists. We should be afraid as well.

Piskorski became very popular in the Russian media and was invited under friendly circumstances as a prominent Polish politician or political expert to comment on events in Ukraine from a “Polish” perspective. He also participated in monitoring the election in Crimea. In May 2016, Piskorski was detained by Polish prosecutors under the suspicion of spying for Russia and possibly China.

Another figure representing a pro-Russian narrative is **Janusz Korwin-Mikke**, MEP and the leader of the **Freedom** party. In the last election, Freedom (at the time known as KORWiN) received 4.76% of the vote, only 0.24% away from entering the Polish parliament. Korwin-Mikke, as a member of the European Parliament, has libertarian economic views and strong anti-EU sentiments. He openly claims that his mission in the European Parliament is to destroy the European Union. When it comes to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Korwin-Mikke supports the annexation of Crimea. He also considers Ukraine to be a threat and an enemy of Poland, while claiming that Russia, “being an enemy of our enemy (i.e., Ukraine), is now our ally.” Korwin-Mikke has expressed his positive attitude towards Putin by claiming that he is a great leader for

Russia, and even considers Ramzan Kadyrov, leader of the Chechen Republic, to be a “reasonable person” with liberal economic views – which are always appreciated in Korwin-Mikke’s political environment. He is not considered an agent of the Kremlin or a monetary beneficiary of Russia, but his political views in many cases perfectly reflect Russia’s standpoints.

Organizations and paramilitary movements

The pro-Russian narrative is propagated in Poland by organizations that operate on many levels to communicate with their audiences. **The European Center of Geopolitical Analysis (ECAG)** is a Polish think tank that has repeatedly been accused of propagating the Russian narrative in Poland. The recent “Laundromat” scandal revealed that ECAG received €27,685 from the UK company Crystalord Limited for “consulting services,” proving a direct financial link between Russian stakeholders (or “dirty money”) and the organization’s activity between 2012 and 2014. Members of ECAG organized or participated in monitoring missions in the unrecognized republics of Abkhazia, Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as in Belarus and Syria, countries governed by authoritarian regimes. In 2011, ECAG members (including Piskorski) visited Libya and took part in a propagandist conference organized by Muammar Gaddafi. In 2013, they went to Syria (on the invitation of the Assad regime) to monitor the civil war situation in the country. Officially representing ECAG, Piskorski gave interviews to the Russian media in which he attempted to convince the Russian audience that the Euromaidan was a provocation by Western politicians and NGOs.

Outside of the mainstream, numerous fringe organizations also spread the Russian

narrative in Poland. Most of these groups are ideologically far-right, though some extreme-left groups exist as well.

Falanga is a Polish organization that took its name from the Polish fascist movement that existed in Poland before the Second World War. Falanga is notable for its anti-NATO views, including its stance against deploying NATO or US troops in Poland. The head of the organization is Bartosz Bekier, who used to visit the occupied territories in Donbas presenting himself as a journalist who strongly supported the separatists. Some of his actions include giving a speech at a rally in Donetsk back in 2014, in which he claimed to represent “free Poles who are against the ‘terrorist’ NATO bases in Poland.” He protested at the Ukrainian embassy in Warsaw surrounded by flags of the DNR and the LNR, boasting the slogan “Save the people of Novorossiya from the Ukrainian army.” Falanga has a quasi-paralimitary unit with which it organized anti-Banderist patrols along the Polish border. Volunteers from Falanga, dressed like fully equipped soldiers, were of particular interest to the Russian propaganda machine; their patrols were presented on the pro-Kremlin NTV channel as an example of Polish fear of Ukrainian fascism.

The Camp of Great Poland (OWP) is another organization that references a pre-war nationalist movement. The organization is strongly opposed to mainstream politics and is most notable for its anti-Ukrainian actions. Dawid Hudziec, a journalist working in occupied Donbas for the Novorossia Today news blog, was a member of OWP. In September of 2015, head of OWP Dawid Berezicki was banned by President Petro Poroshenko from entering the territory of Ukraine, as was Dawid Hudziec. In January of 2016, OWP co-organized a propagandist trip to Crimea and Moscow.

The Communist Youth of Poland represents the far-left on the spectrum of the

political scene. Praising not only communist Poland, but even Stalinism in the Soviet Union, this organization tends to represent a fringe ideology that has extremely little support among Poles. However, the Communist Youth of Poland were also among the founding members of the Change political party. The only potentially noteworthy member of the organization is Ludmiła Dobrzyniecka, leader of the group. She holds a favorable view of Stalin’s dictatorship and sees him as a great leader. Most importantly, Dobrzyniecka has left Poland to fight in Donbas on the side of pro-Russian separatists in the Luhansk People’s Republic. She is currently a member of the *Interunit* international brigade.

Media

Facebook and other designated websites are the main channels used to reach the Polish audience. Usually, the media that support the Russian narrative devote considerable attention and space to articles related to Ukraine. Other issues are exploited to a lesser extent, but are still covered in order to make sure that the reader notices that the authors contest liberalism and the modern-day world order in general.

The most high-profile website considered to present the Russian narrative is **Kresy.pl**, which displays strong anti-Ukrainian attitudes based on historic resentment. Another openly pro-Russian page is **Xportal**, established by Bartosz Bekier, who is also a leader of far-right Falanga.

Novorossiya Today, Tragedy of Donbas (both websites) and **Fighting Novorossiya** (a Facebook page) are some other fringe media outlets fueled by Russian propaganda. All of them are edited by Dawid Hudziec, affiliate of the Camp of Great Poland, who now works as a journalist in occupied Donbas. Another interesting

example is **Tomasz Maciejczuk**, who underwent a conversion from “pro-Ukrainian journalist” to “Ukrainian fascist hunter.” Some time ago, he announced his new post as a regular contributor to the Russian television channel Rossiya 24.

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic’s official position does not differ from the political mainstream regarding views on the war in Ukraine or Russia’s influence on the conflict in Donbas. After the annexation of Crimea, Czech deputies issued a statement condemning the decision of the authorities of the Russian Federation. In a resolution approved by 121 deputies, the annexation was recognized as an act of violence against Ukraine. Additionally, the Czech Republic officially supports the EU’s sanction policies towards Russia.

However, the status of Russian influence in the Czech Republic remains very peculiar. The pro-Russian narrative maintains representation on various levels of politics and the media, from mainstream organizations to fringe ones. The Russian narrative is spread by a small, yet loud and visible minority. The most recognizable pro-Kremlin influencer in the Czech Republic is Miloš Zeman, president of the country. His stance on Russia, characterized mostly by his expressing “understanding” of the Kremlin’s foreign policy, is backed by political parties (mainstream and fringe) and various media outlets.

Politics

Miloš Zeman, president of the Czech Republic, is considered a pro-Russian agenda setter in the Czech political mainstream. His notorious pro-Kremlin statements include claims that Crimea cannot be returned to Ukraine and that

Arseniy Yatseniuk, former prime minister of Ukraine, was a “prime minister of war.” In 2015, Zeman was the only EU president who visited Moscow to commemorate the anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Zeman’s views are echoed and amplified in the Czech parliament by the **Freedom and Direct Democracy** party (**Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD**). In many respects, SPD is a textbook example of a Eurosceptic party. SPD tried to call a referendum to withdraw the Czech Republic from the EU but failed to receive support for it in the Czech parliament. The party leader, Tomio Okamura, has a much more positive stance towards Russia than towards the EU or NATO. Regarding the war in Ukraine, he consistently denies Russia’s involvement in the conflict – in fact, Okamura sees the conflict as a civil war provoked by the USA and the EU. Consistent with their political views Okamura and SPD disapprove of the sanctions imposed on Russia.

Beyond the mainstream, the Kremlin’s narrative is also represented by the far-right **National Democracy** party (**Národní demokracie, ND**). This party presents not only pro-Kremlin views, but also strong anti-Semitism. When Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, ND decided to send a letter to the Russian Embassy in the Czech Republic. The letter expressed support for Vladimir Putin and his policies and welcomed Russia’s efforts in the interest of ensuring order and stability in Ukraine. Later the same year, the deputy chairman of ND visited Donbas under occupation in order to take part in an electoral observation mission and was subsequently declared a *persona non grata* by the Ukrainian authorities.

Organizations and paramilitary movements

Pro-Russian political activities are supported through the work of various non-governmental organizations. Arguably, the most recognizable example is the **“Consulate” of the Donetsk People’s Republic** that opened in the Czech Republic in September 2016. Since Prague does not officially recognize the DNR, the “Consulate” is in fact a Czech NGO. Nela Liskova, who has connections with the Freedom and Direct Democracy party, is the head of the NGO and a self-described “honorary consul” of the DNR in the Czech Republic.

The Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies is a Czech NGO that identifies strongly with the Pan-Slavic movement. The Institute mostly promotes pro-Russian opinions, while criticizing the EU and the US. Articles published by the organization claim that the Americans are threatening Russia with terrorist attacks, that the real terrorists are European and Czech governors, and that the US is responsible for the terrorist attacks in France. Some events of the Institute have been co-organized by the Freedom and Direct Democracy party.

The Czech-Moravian Slavic Association represents a peculiar mutation of communist-nationalist ideology. As with the previous group, the main ideology that stands behind the organization is Pan-Slavism. The organization supports Kremlin policy because it is considered to be pro-Slavic, while the Ukrainian government represents anti-Slavic resentment. The Czech-Moravian Slavic Association cooperates with the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies.

There are also paramilitary groups in the Czech Republic that promote the Russian narrative. **Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserves (Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze, CSR)** opposes the policies of the Slovak and Czech authorities, who are deemed to be servants to the EU and USA. CSR believes that NATO is preparing for

war against Russia. It also objects to all attempts to blame Russia for the situation in Ukraine and labels the current Ukrainian government as fascist and illegal. Another paramilitary organization is the **National Home Guard (Národní domobrana)**, established in affiliation with the National Democracy party. Nela Liskova, self-proclaimed “honorary consul” of DNR in the Czech Republic is a member of the National Home Guard.

Media

The Russian narrative is featured mainly on social media and in other areas of the internet. It focuses primarily on attacking the EU, NATO, the US or Ukraine, while to a lesser extent also promoting a positive image of Russia. The main propagators of the Kremlin’s narrative are **Our Media**, which runs several disinformation projects, including the **Parliamentary Sheets (Parlamentní listy)** website; **AC24.cz**, which promotes the Kremlin’s point of view on international events, often referencing non-existent documents or reports from the Russian Ministry of Defense or other official bodies; and **Sputnik Czech Republic**.

Slovakia

Slovakia appears to be one of the prime targets of Russian influence. Based on “Pan-Slavic” resentment, which has found fertile ground in Slovakia, the Kremlin narrative has influenced a considerable number of entities, including a political party represented in the parliament and recognized media. Among the Central European countries, the Slovakian government is considered “dovish” with regard to the level of its criticism of Russia for annexation of Crimea and its engagement in the war in Donbas, as opposed to the “hawkish” Baltic States and

Poland. Prime Minister Robert Fico has been one of the most outspoken critics of the sanctions that were imposed on Russia back in 2014. Yet, when it comes to practical policymaking, the Slovakian government adheres to the European mainstream, whose official policy is to keep sanctions and support the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The success of the Kremlin narrative in Slovakia is, however, undeniable, with an openly anti-Western and pro-Russian political party currently holding seats in the parliament and the country witnessing a tremendous growth in paramilitary movements inclined towards the Kremlin’s world view.

Politics

The Kremlin has found a perfect partner for furthering its narrative in Slovakia in the far-right **People’s Party our Slovakia (L’SNS)**. Led by Marian Kotleba, a former school teacher and governor of Banska Bystrica, L’SNS has been present in the Slovakian parliament since 2016, when it won 8% of the popular vote. The popularity of the party raises serious concern among the Slovakian elite, as well as among many regular Slovaks, who see the party as a neo-fascist movement. The opponents of L’SNS have plenty of evidence to support this view. Marian Kotleba himself praises Josef Tiso and the First Slovak Republic. Among the L’SNS membership, one can find people who have praised Adolf Hitler and Nazism, Holocaust deniers and people who have been investigated and prosecuted for criminal offences motivated by racial hatred, especially against the Roma minority.

L’SNS’s anti-Western attitude is crystal clear. Kotleba and other members of the party see the European Union and NATO as threats to national sovereignty. Members of the party spout strong criticism of these institutions on a regular basis – this was also

part of the party’s political campaign for the 2016 national parliamentary elections. During the campaign, L’SNS published their program – *Ten points for our Slovakia*. The program called NATO a “criminal pact which serves to promote the power interests of the USA” and called for ending cooperation with the West and instead introducing a balanced cooperation with all the countries of the world.

The leaders of L’SNS are known for presenting opinions that are similar to views popular in Kremlin circles. In January 2014, Marian Kotleba, then acting governor of Banska Bystrica, sent a letter to Viktor Yanukovich backing his actions during the Euromaidan. He called the protesters “terrorists” and said the real reason behind the conflict is the EU’s greed for new markets and NATO’s pushing its military closer to the border of the Russian Federation.

This hatred of the EU and NATO was reiterated once more in October 2016, when L’SNS organized signature collections for a referendum to withdraw Slovakia from the EU and NATO.

The extremist policy of L’SNS has been recently addressed by the Prosecutor General, who asked the Slovakian Supreme Court to ban the party, accusing it of infringement of the constitution and trying to destroy the country’s democratic system.

Organizations and paramilitary movements

The strong position of paramilitary movements is evident in Slovakia. They represent a wide spectrum of political views, with some leaning toward right-wing positions and others toward the left side of the political scene. There is, however, one thing that unifies them – strong connections

with Russia, represented by ideological connections, personal connections or both.

Slovak Conscripts (*Slovenskí branci – SB*) is a paramilitary movement established in 2012 along the lines of the image and standards of Russian military-patriotic clubs. The organization was launched by Slovak students who had participated in paramilitary courses in Russia and decided to mirror their Russian training in their home country. The SB network has been growing fairly quickly – at the end of 2016, they already had 17 territorial units with approximately 150 members.

The organization considers itself apolitical, but is usually associated with an “anti-fascist” stance. They perceive the Second World War as a historical struggle against fascism and Nazism and distance themselves from wartime Slovakia and Josef Tiso. Yet, the organization has been showing strong inclinations towards the “Pan-Slavic” idea, which can be seen mostly in its negative attitude towards NATO and the USA, and to a lesser extent in its attitudes towards the EU. SB’s “Pan-Slavism” is often in line with Russian interests. One of its members went to Donbas to fight on the side of the pro-Russian separatists, while another travelled to Russia to participate in trainings conducted by Russian Cossacks. Its members are known for statements refusing to acknowledge the Russian military’s presence in Ukraine or denying that Russia illegally annexed Crimea.

Action Group Resistance Kysuce (*Akčná skupina Vzdor Kysuce – VK*) is a far-right paramilitary movement that glorifies Josef Tiso and espouses radical anti-Semitism. It claims to follow in the legacy of Slovakia’s war-time army that fought alongside the Wehrmacht “against Bolshevism.” The movement has connections with the L’SNS political party. The leader of VK ran an unsuccessful campaign for parliament on

L’SNS’s list. VK strongly disapproves of current Slovak-Russian relations. The group has called upon its supporters to take active measures – including infiltrating the army and politics and even using weapons against incumbent politicians – to change national policy and prevent Slovak-Russian tensions, which they say have a catastrophic influence on Slovakia.

Slovak Soldiers’ Association (*Asociácia slovenských vojakov – ASV*) is a civilian-military organization established in 1991. After a number of years “in limbo,” it was relaunched in 2015. The organization has attracted mainly retired Slovak officers and has been quickly recognized as an institution that is critical of NATO.

ASV believes the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is increasingly becoming a tool for the American and European elites’ aggression in the fight for redistribution of resources, not for the defense of democracy (which they deem is already an essentially “dead ideology”). The group is also a proponent of Russian interests in the region, recently accusing the Slovak Ministry of Defense of cooperating with NGOs that “conduct mostly one-sided lobbying in favor of NATO’s military campaign against the Russian Federation and for the benefit of the military-industrial complex of the United States.”

Media

The openly pro-Russian camp on Slovakia’s media landscape consists of several, mostly fringe, media outlets. **Earth and Age (*Zem a Vek*)** is a monthly conspiratorial periodical that promotes anti-Western, anti-EU and anti-NATO views and has been openly supporting the rebellion in Donbas.

HlavneSpravy.sk is a web portal that mixes fake news coming from Russia with reliable information from the mainstream media. In 2016, the two entities mentioned above

formed the Association of Independent Media in cooperation with **Free Broadcaster (*Slobodný vysielateľ*)**, an online radio channel which is also considered a source of anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric. Other outlets considered to be spreading the Kremlin’s narrative are the bi-weeklies **Literary Weekly (*Literárny týždenník*)** and **Warrior (*Bojovník*)** and the monthly **Extra Plus**.

Hungary

Unlike the other Visegrad countries, Hungary lacks linguistic and cultural connections with Russia. Nor can it refer to Pan-Slavic ideology. Economic pragmatism, derived from energy dependency, has for many years been the driving force behind Hungary’s policy vis-à-vis Russia. For the last few years, however, Hungary has been witnessing an eastward turn in its overall politics, which is revealed in the Hungarian version of illiberal democracy, a phenomenon that derives many of its features from the Kremlin’s formula of governing the state. The country is susceptible to the Russian narrative, which in Hungary is based on questioning Hungary’s membership in the EU and NATO and arousing resentments towards Transylvania and Transcarpathia with the aim to open territorial disputes with Ukraine and Romania.

Politics

Many point out **Fidesz**, the Hungarian ruling party, when discussing the strengthening of ties between Hungary and Russia. Prime minister Victor Orbán and his aides have been criticized for implementing Kremlin-style policies in Hungary, for instance, with regard to NGOs. In 2014, Orbán gave a speech in which he declared that he wants to build an “illiberal democracy” in Hungary.

The most disturbing example of mainstream political force being responsible for promoting the Kremlin’s interests in Hungary is, however, the far-right **Jobbik – Movement for a Better Hungary**. Jobbik is part of a network of far-right parties in Europe that support Russian geopolitical goals by echoing the Kremlin’s “mindset” and its attempts to destabilize NATO and the EU. For years, Jobbik had not been worried about the movement’s aggressive and nationalistic image. In 2013/2014, however, the party decided to change its strategy and has been undergoing a general facelift, shifting closer to the political center in the hope of attracting new voters. Despite trying to shed its negative image in the mainstream, Jobbik has not severed its connections with the right-wing radical scene of Hungarian politics. Although the party has made great efforts to distance itself from extremist movements, any real changes have been superficial, applied first and foremost to satisfy and mislead the general public. In reality, Jobbik remains intertwined with the extremist and paramilitary organizations that have become even more important in channeling the Kremlin’s narrative in Hungary.

Organizations and paramilitary movements

There is an abundance of far-right extremist organizations that either deliberately or unintentionally push the Russian agenda in Hungary. What is common to all of these organizations is their extreme negative perceptions of the Roma minority and migrants coming to Hungary due to the refugee crisis. They display negative attitudes towards the European Union and NATO and frequently include a policy of border revisionism as part of their political agenda.

The Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (HVIM) is a revisionist, hate-fueled organization whose goal is the restoration of Great Hungary. Its anti-Semitic and anti-Roma attitude is widely known. Facebook has even banned the pages of all groups affiliated with the organization, apparently for their use of Nazi symbols. The group has on multiple occasions questioned the territorial integrity of Ukraine. In 2014, HVIM co-organized (with Jobbik) protests in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Budapest to demand autonomy for Transcarpathia and has opted for the federalization of Ukraine. The same year, HVIM organized protests calling for a “patriotic stand in support of Russia.”

The Army of Outlaws is another extremist organization that cooperates closely with HVIM. Both were established by Laszlo Toroczkai, the current Mayor of the city of Ásotthalom. He is also a vice president in Jobbik. The Army of Outlaws openly uses violence, especially against the Roma minority, and obtains a part of its revenue from “protecting” other organizations. The organization is very susceptible to Russian propaganda and even uses its own channels to spread it, including the Facebook profiles of its members. On its website, one can read a field report by one of its members about a visit to Russia that describes the country as a model of law and order and normalcy, as opposed to the West, infected by liberal values. The group sees Russia’s interventions in Ukraine and Syria as legitimate and describes Putin’s regime as a guarantor of peace and orderliness.

The paramilitary **New Hungarian Guard Movement (MÖM)** is another unofficial acolyte of Jobbik. The organization is mostly active as an anti-refugee movement, which promotes the view that the migration crisis in Hungary and Europe was organized with US funding.

The **Hungarian Self-Defense Movement**, a sister organization of Jobbik, tries to depict itself as a group that is open to society, one which organizes donation drives and assists in flood prevention and community care projects. In reality, the organization is yet another example of an extreme-right movement, dangerous primarily due to its military-type training, which is offered by the “self-defense chapter” of the group, as well as the constant threat it poses to the Roma minority. They also regularly conduct anti-migrant events together with Jobbik.

Media

Extremist organizations operate mostly through the social media, websites and occasional interviews. Their peculiar views find little understanding in the mainstream media and their views on Russia rarely reach the general public. When they occur, it is mostly through “scandals,” such as in 2015, when the extreme-right Ukrainian paramilitary organization Karpatska Sich threatened to annihilate Jobbik and HVIM activists they saw as undermining the Ukrainian state and destabilizing the region, or in 2016, when the leader of the pro-Russian Hungarian National Front (the organization was afterwards dissolved) killed a police officer when his house was searched for weapons.

The pro-Kremlin narrative’s presence in the mainstream is mostly thanks to the presence of Jobbik in the political mainstream. Jobbik’s connections with Russia are both apparent and controversial. Probably the most “spectacular” cooperation was revealed in 2014, and involved Bela Kovacs, a Hungarian Member of the European Parliament and the former head of Jobbik’s policy cabinet. Kovacs was accused by the authorities of espionage against the EU on behalf of Russia. The accusation was not followed by any concrete measures,

however, and Kovacs has remained politically active in Brussels.

Conclusions

The Kremlin’s narrative in the Visegrad countries is promulgated through different entities and exploits a variety of topics to achieve its strategic goals. Although the pro-Russian narrative is generally shared (intentionally or unintentionally) by fringe media outlets, it also counts adherents among the mainstream political parties and even the most prominent politicians. Jobbik in Hungary, the Freedom and Direct Party in the Czech Republic and the People’s Party in Slovakia all hold seats in national parliaments and put forward agendas that oppose western values and question membership in the EU and NATO. At the same time, their political views are often in favor of the Kremlin’s interests. In the case of the Czech Republic, even the president has on many occasions echoed the Russian narrative.

While some topics are commonly exploited by Russian propaganda in the Visegrad countries, others are country specific. The anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-US agenda is a common denominator for the Kremlin’s narrative in the V4, as is the disinformation campaign about refugees invading Europe. As complicated as the situation with the refugee crisis is, the propaganda tries to depict migration as a serious threat to both national security and traditional European values. In Poland, the Kremlin’s narrative of disinformation concentrates heavily on disturbing Polish-Ukrainian relations by provoking disagreements over history and frightening Poles with visions of massive migration from Ukraine that may be harmful for the Polish job market. In Hungary, it revives resentment towards “Great Hungary” and incites questioning the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Romania. In the Czech

Republic, and especially in Slovakia, Pan-Slavic ideology has been revisited, with Russia as the center of the Pan-Slavic world, and contemporary Ukraine and the West as its main enemies.

Combating the Russian narrative in the Visegrad countries has been sluggish. Although the Ministry of Interior in the Czech Republic launched the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, actions undertaken in the Visegrad countries are insufficient and ineffective. The analytical community has been slowly, but consistently, gaining knowledge about the Russian narrative in the respective Visegrad countries. Now is the time to take a new approach and develop sustainable (not occasional) national and multinational cooperation, with the inclusion of people from European institutions.

The first step is to stop ignoring the potential threat of disinformation. Politicians have to speak about it openly and condemn the meddling of Kremlin propaganda in national politics. A great example has already been set by President Emmanuel Macron during his meeting with President Putin in May 2017. Talking to journalists, Macron heavily criticized Russia Today and Sputnik for spreading lies during the French presidential campaign¹.

Apart from words, concrete actions are also necessary. The financial links of organizations and media outlets that lobby the Kremlin’s narrative should be scrutinized. Information revealed in recent months shows that Russian capital was used to finance anti-Ukraine and pro-separatist protests in Poland and other

¹ *Macron, Standing Alongside Putin, Says Russian Media Spread ‘Falsehoods’*, “The Atlantic”, 30 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2017/05/macron-rt-sputnik-are-agents-of-influence/528480/>.

countries, mostly in 2014 and 2015². This situation demands a proper investigation by national security forces, as well as by investigative journalists and constant monitoring by the analytical community.

Finally, the countries of the European Union should develop deeper cooperation among their secret service units to deal with Russian disinformation. Only effective cooperation in this area can help bring about the early detection and neutralization of these potential threats to national security.

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The report draws on the results of the project “*The activity of pro-Russian extremist groups in Central-Eastern Europe*, carried out by Political Capital (Budapest, Hungary). The project covered the Russian narrative in the Visegrad Group and in Austria. As a partner in the project, the IPA has prepared a report on the situation in Poland. Each chapter is based on conclusions from a national report written by the following authors: Ł. Wenerski, M. Kacwicz, *Russian soft power in Poland - The Kremlin and pro-Russian organizations*, Political Capital/Institute of Public Affairs, Budapest 2017; P. Vejvodova, J. Janda, V. Vichova, *The Russian connections of far-right and paramilitary organizations in the Czech Republic*, Political Capital/European Values, Budapest 2017; G. Meseznikov, R. Branik, *Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training - The violent radicalisation and*

² *Foot Soldiers in a Shadowy Battle Between Russia and the West*, “The New York Times”, 28.05.2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/slovakia-czech-republic-hungary-poland-russia-agitation.html>.

Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups, Political Capital/Institute for Public Affairs/Globsec, Budapest 2017; A. Juhasz, L. Gyori, E. Zgut, A. Dezso, *The Truth Today Is What Putin Says It Is*, Political Capital, Budapest 2017. Information provided in the text has been taken directly from abovementioned reports, unless stated otherwise.

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